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BBC Wildlife, 14 (n=3), March 1994, p. 33
Hans Fricke (inset-ISC)
ANIMAL
ENIGMAS
Prehistoric fishing
> scientific resurrection of the coelacanth
ish that, by rights, should have been extinct for
million years must be a once-in-an-eon event.
t could it happen again, just half a century later?
ichard Greenwell examines the evidence.
The history of zoology changed
dramatically in December of
1938, when a young South
an naturalist named Marjorie
tenay-Latimer found, by chance,
ng specimen of a coelacanth, an
ent six-foot fish thought extinct
the time of the dinosaurs. It is a
ber of a group of lobe-finned
s that evolved in the Upper
onian, more than 400 million
ago-making the coelacanth
ldest known form of living
brate. About 70 fossil coelacanth
ies have been described, the
: recent being Macropoma,
ito about 80 million years ago.
ourtenay-Latimer's discovery of
ng coelacanth, verified by JLB
h-who formally described it as
neria chalumnae - stunned the
ogical world, and resulted in all
chthyology and palaeontology
books having to be rewritten. It is
considered the zoological find of
century. In 1952, Smith obtained
cond specimen, uncovering the
s secret habitat: the waters of the
oros Islands, between
lagascar and East Africa.
ntil recently, all of the 200 or so
imens caught in the intervening

ears have come from the
1oros. There has been a lot of
ulation as to whether unknown
acanth populations might also
in African coastal waters, an idea
ngthened by the finding, in 1991,
specimen off Mozambique.
s Fricke, the German
nyologist who in 1987 was the
to film coelacanths in their
erwater habitat, has even searched
hem in South African waters in
ubmersible - unsuccessfully.
'hile this question remains
esolved, others have been
nining evidence for possible
acanths further afield. The first
comes from 1949, when a woman
ran a small souvenir shop in
pa, Florida - on the Gulf of
xico - mailed a strange fish scale
aac Ginsburg at the US Fish and
dlife Laboratory. She wrote how
had bought a gallon can full of
scales, each measuring 1.5 inches
ss, and had become curious as to
t kind of fish they were from. Dr

Ginsburg recognised that the scale
did not represent any known North
American fish and informed Science
News Letter that it must have come
from a primitive coelacanth-like fish.
He wrote to the woman requesting
details, but she never responded.
Dr Ginsburg has since died, and as
far as I know, he never pursued the
matter. A 1988 inquiry to the Division
of Fishes at the US National Museum
in Washington - where Dr Ginsburg's
laboratory was - failed to uncover the
whereabouts of the scale. But in 1992,
43 years after this event, Frenchman
Roland Heu bought some fish scales
in a souvenir shop in Biloxi,
Mississippi, and he believes they
came from a coelacanth.
Coincidentally - and quite
independently - Sterling Lanier, a
knowledgeable American naturalist
and former book editor who visited
me in Tucson in October 1993, told

me a similar story, which he set down in a written statement. About 20 years before, when he was selling his well-known brass figurines of fossil animals at an outdoor art show near Florida's Gulf coast, another artist was displaying a necklace made of fish scales that "looked very much like those of Latimeria." He had extracted these from a pile of 'trash' fish, crabs, and seaweed from a Gulf shrimp boat. "He had caught their glitter," recalls Lanier in his statement, "and picked them out, one by one. The owner let Lanier examine and sketch the scales, but he refused to sell the necklace. Unfortunately, Lanier, now retired in Sarasota, Florida, has lost the original notes and sketches, and all we have is his statement. He has no knowledge of other supposed Gulf of Mexico coelacanth scales, and had assumed his was the only such report.

Our story now moves from the Gulf of Mexico to the Bay of Biscay, on Spain's northern Basque coast. There, in 1964, in a small village church near Bilbao, Brazilian chemist Ladislao Reti bought a small, four-inch silver fish from the priest. The depiction is a little different from Latimeria-indicating a different species - but it is a coelacanth. How did this silver object arrive at the church? Nobody knows, but it is believed to be from the nineteenth century. If so, coelacanths must have been known to someone somewhere before the 1938 South African discovery. The following year, another silver coelacanth was purchased in an antique shop in Toledo, this time by Maurice Steinert, a molecular biologist at the Brussels Free University.

This second model eventually came to the attention of Hans Fricke, who in 1987 flew to Brussels to inspect it. Again, he found that it was like a coelacanth, but a little different, hinting at an as-yet-undiscovered species. Dr Fricke then consulted

with silver art specialists, who opined that the silver fish had been made in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Frustrated, Dr Fricke went to northern Spain with Raphael Plante, a Marseilles marine biologist, and they searched old churches and antique shops for more silver coelacanths - without luck. But through their consultations with church and museum officials, they learnt that silver fish collections have always been popular with aristocrats. So further discoveries in such collections may be possible.

One more clue uncovered by Dr Fricke was that Professor Valdavinus, Author Catch of the epoch.

That there could ever be such a thing as this a photograph of a living coelacanth - would once have seemed as impossible a prospect as a snapshot of a Tyrannosaurus. But there it is all the same.

Now, what about that other likeness (inset), made in Mexico, probably, two or three hundred years ago? Can there be more than one impossible fish in the sea?

in Madrid, who is a silver art expert, believes that the silver coelacanths probably originated in colonial Mexico, only later finding their way to Mother Spain. Thus, we may now ponder the question: is it just a coincidence that coelacanth-like scales have been turning up in the Gulf of Mexico?

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the study of
unverified animals.
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